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The deadline for shoring up federal transportation dollars for Illinois projects is looming, and suburban leaders are concerned about getting their piece of the pie.

Congress is moving forward on a bill, called TEA-3, for transportation funding that comes up only once every six years. The surface transportation bill's deadline is April 30.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, and transportation planning leaders, who spoke Monday at a forum held at the Hyatt in Deerfield, said they were determined to see Illinois get more of the federal transportation dollars in TEA-3 than it did in the current TEA-21, which designated funds from 1998 to 2003.

"Why did Illinois lose TEA-21? Illinois lost because there was fighting between the suburbs and the city," Kirk said. "The enemy is not the city and not the suburbs, but it is other big cities."

So far, the Senate version of TEA-3 has pledged \$318 billion for transportation while the House version has pledged \$275 billion.

Among the many projects earmarked in the transportation bill is Metra's STAR Line, a 55-mile route that will link 100 communities from O'Hare Airport to Joliet along the Northwest Tollway and the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern line. The project is estimated to cost \$1.2 billion.

Leaders from northeastern Illinois need to argue that the region needs more than a strict proportional share of the dollars because of its unique position as a national transportation hub, said Metropolitan Planning Council President MarySue Barrett.

The state should allocate the funds based on needs and not on population, she said. "This region lost \$600 million over six years because the (previous) formula hurt us," Barrett said.

"We made progress, but that was catch-up. Between 1994 and 1999, we had no state package (of transportation funding)," Barrett said.

Also of concern, the Illinois First program, which has pumped millions of dollars into rebuilding state highways, is set to expire in June, Barrett said.

Dick Smith of the Illinois Department of Transportation also expressed concern.

"With \$275 billion in the House bill, it will be impossible for Illinois to add new projects. The funding over the last six years has not been keeping pace with inflation," Smith said. Even the \$318 billion Senate bill would only allow for a "modest" increase in projects, he said.

But Smith said the state has hope in a "two-year re-opener" provision in the bill, which would allow legislators to come back in one and one-half years for more funding if new revenue could be found. "Then we can step forward with some new initiatives," Smith said.

Illinois is getting 28 percent more in funding than the bill from six years ago, Kirk said. He attributed the success to two powerful congressmen: Speaker J. Dennis Hastert, R-14th, of Yorkville, and U.S. Rep. William Lipinski, D-3rd, of Chicago.

"It is about political muscle. Illinois is the one with political muscle," Kirk said.

In particular, four new massive transit starts have come to Illinois as a result of Hastert and Lipinski, including the STAR line and the widening of the Route 60 bridge, Kirk said.

Larry Bury, transportation director of the Northwest Municipal Conference, however, isn't so pessimistic about the STAR Line's chances of survival.

"Considering we're going for earlier phases of the project, which are only a couple of million dollars, I'm optimistic that we'll be able to progress," he said in a phone interview Tuesday.

Metra is expected to name a consultant who will analyze the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern line portion. Bury said, the analysis will likely make the case for why the project is valuable. An analysis has already been done on the Northwest Tollway portion of the project.

The federal transportation bill earmarks preliminary engineering funds for the STAR Line.